Creation of Adam

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Creation of Adam

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Summary

Will understood loneliness; ever since he discovered the body of the only person who ever cared for him dripping blood on the bathroom floor, he made peace with it. He was content enough to have the companionship of Astoria, his protective daemon. And even when he found love in the entirely too-perfect form of Hannibal Lecter, there were some things that were too barbed, too jagged to share.

Until he finds himself investigating a horrifying crime-scene, daemons split apart from their companions. A crime-scene that reeks of the same loneliness he's known for so long.

Notes

Thank you for the amazing prompt, LadyOfTheMist27! Reneehart and I had a fun time developing this world and fitting Hannigram into a universe with daemons. We hope you enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Will awoke with a groan, stiff muscles pulling out into a languid stretch. He was tacky, slick with sweat that made the thin cotton pajamas cling to his warmed skin and curls to his brow. The evening had been hot, humid so that the very air itself was a palpable presence. An oppressive phantom that strangled his lungs.

The whir of the fan as it oscillated in its perch did little to ease the heat of summer in Louisiana, but the rush of air as it swung in his direction was a welcome reprieve. He pulled himself up from his bed, running fingers through his hair only to pull his lips into a snarl of disgust when they tangled through dampened locks.

“Gross,” he mumbled, rubbing his hand against the sheet- pulled from the corner in his tossing through the night- and sat up.

A whine cut through the air, followed by the sound of large paws lumbering against hardwood, nails clicking over the scratched and worn surface. He smiled as he felt the snout press against his leg- large and wet, flaring with an inhale as Astoria sniffed him in greeting. He reached a hand outward, smoothing the short and cropped fur of her head- the wrinkled flesh of her snout pliant in his touch, long ears flopping almost playfully as she keened beneath the attention.

The form of a mastiff dog was the one she’d decided on so long ago, shifting through an assortment of breeds before finding the one she donned now like protective armor. All of them large; massive bodies built for curling around the small boy and defending him from the blows of fists and kicking feet. Powerful jaws with sharpened teeth revealed beneath the growling jowls in a threat. Intimidating beasts that walked beside him like a protector, her very presence a ward against the bullies that fell all too often in his path. He hoped she’d settle into this form for good, a shape and size that could keep *her* safe even if he couldn’t.

Though some bullies were not so easily deterred; some too cruel, too *big* even for the dog daemon to scare away. Though she tried, fiercely loyal even as Will beckoned her to do otherwise. To become small herself to avoid the wayward blows that sometimes struck her.

She followed him as he rose, walking across the room and out into the hall on the rounded balls of his feet- avoiding the floorboards he knew to be the loudest. To creak with a cry that might awaken his father prematurely, the resonating ache of whatever hangover he nursed already enough to sour his morning without Will making it worse.

He frowned as he approached the bathroom door- closed, a halo of golden light spilling through the cracks. The lull of the fan was a mechanical sound, muffled and discordant- though there were no tell-tale signs of a shower running behind the door. No pipes croaking in the walls, no splattering of water as it drummed against the porcelain curve of the tub.

A furtive glance down the hall found his father’s room, the door pushed open enough to show the man asleep in the otherwise empty bed, snores jarring through the stilted silence. The top sheet was tossed aside, the pillows in the space beside him rumpled from where his girlfriend turned in her sleep before retreating to the single bathroom in the small home.

He sighed, crossing his legs in a pitiful attempt to hold his bladder, leaning back against the wall. He splayed his palms out on either side of him, thumping his fingers in an uneven rhythm. Keeping time as he waited, his desperation mounting with each dragging minute.

When nearly five minutes had passed and he could hold it no longer, he pushed himself from the wall, stepping in front of the door and rapping the tips of his fingers against it- only the tips, carefully to keep the sound light enough to not draw any unwanted attention. “Lexi? Are you almost done? I gotta pee,” he whispered through the door, his forehead settling against it.

He felt the large form move beside him, one oversized paw reaching for the bottom of the door in a silent scratch that mirrored Will’s own knocking- snout pressed firmly against the floor.

And then Astoria *whined* - a pitched and distressed sound, unlike the curious whimpers she offered in a huff when words were too cluttered for her tongue. An alarming sound, one which brought with it a sudden lurch of dread and prompted Will to slap his hand more firmly against the door- an eager thump that shook it in its frame.

He winced at the rattling, glancing to the bedroom door and releasing a sigh of relief when his father still remained on his side- back to him, sweat darkening the back of his shirt. “Lexi?” he asked, a warning as his hand curled around the doorknob and found it unlocked. His eyes narrowed curiously, the dread that curdled in his belly now crawling further up his throat- burning like bile in his esophagus.

He swallowed it back- along with the childish desire to turn away from the bathroom and slip back into his bed, turning to his dreams for comfort even if little was found within them. The hinges creaked as he pushed the door open, slow and purposeful in consideration for the privacy he was snatching as he stepped inside, eyes lowered to the floor.

Water splashed with the steps, puddling along the peeling linoleum and revealing the damaged subfloor beneath. His brows furrowed, jaw clenched at the pink-tinged waters spilled over from the tub- a pale and listless arm draped over the lip. The blood that ran from her split wrist was bright; rivulets of crimson that seeped down the slender curve of her hand- dripping into the waters below.

A steady beat, each drop rippling against the surface of the waterlogged floor. A pendulum, each drop a rupture.

He stared at it- useless and paralyzed, watching as the drop of blood made the whole floor shimmer and pulse like the beat of a dying heart turning pale and gray. Lips parted on a stolen breath, the stale oxygen burning in his lungs as he held it for too long.

It wasn’t until Astoria pushed past him- paws disrupting the water that had so completely captured his attention- did he lurch into action, reality cracking against him like a physical collision.

“Lexi?” he called out, his own heartbeat erratic as it pulsed a staccato behind his ribs, panic ratcheting within him. He nearly slipped in his haste to run to the woman’s side, feet skidding

over the floor and an arm flailing out beside him to catch himself on the rim of the vanity sink.

Yet he was unbothered, falling to his knees so the trousers of his pajamas became sodden, seeping frigid water against his flesh.

He reached a hand outward, touching her elbow before he reeled back, uncertainty clouding his senses. What if he made it *worse?* Quickening the march to her death with clumsy and unpracticed hands?

What if she was already dead, his fingerprints decorating her pale flesh like the purple bruises that blossomed over the canvas?

The moments passed in an indistinguishable blur, collapsing into itself like a dying star. As though he were nothing more than a bystander to his own life, a singular audience as it played out on the movie screen before him.

Astoria leapt into action where he froze, pushing him until he scrambled into the corner of the room, clearing the way for his father to enter- pulled from sleep yet startled awake. His father thankfully- *mercifully* - ignored him, hands flitting across the body slumped in the tub.

Body .

That was the correct term, he knew before he even understood how. Knew in an instinctual but certain way that she was dead- her head lolling to the side as Beau grasped her jaw before withdrawing. Lips paling in death, her pink-tinged flesh draining of color before his very eyes, seeping into the waters that spilled over the tub in rushing waves each time she was jostled. Overfilled, her weight growing more substantial as death turned her into a statue beneath the watery grave.

He didn't realize he was crying until he felt the rough drag of a tongue against his face, Astoria once more standing before him like a balustrade of protection- trying to shield him from a danger that she simply was ill-equipped to handle. An insidious danger, more crippling even than the fists that ruptured against his sides and bruised his flesh.

Yet he reached for her all the same, fingers sinking into thick fur and folded skin. He held her, a child clutching the tufted toy given to them at an impressionable age. Held her as he was ushered from the room, the wet pants itching over his skin. Held her as the police and emergency services came into his home like a harbinger, a crude facsimile of the funeral procession to follow in the coming days.

His chest ached, clenching around something he could not name. An aching hollowness that split like a divide within him. Unlike the resonating sting that came in the wake of his mom's abandonment, her search for something *more* as though Will was something *less* . The rejection was a brutal blow but one he managed all the same.

This was something crueler, something *wrong* .

Jagged pieces that didn't fit together, a structure without uniform.

He *adored* Lexi, loving the space she filled that had been left empty in his mother's absence. And she adored him, kind and patient where his father was anything but. A dichotomy to the man they both tiptoed around.

Unhappy , maybe. He couldn't fault her if she too longed for something more than the rigid cage their home had become, Beau fashioning a prison out of plaster and a mimicry of *family values* .

But she didn't fade, did not whither away in her own hopelessness and pity. The walls of the bathroom- still ringing with the dissonant churn of the fan- did not pulse with such a wilting death.

They thrummed with *anger* , bitter and acidic. A poison that sat on his tongue, metallic-like the blood that stained the white porcelain tomb- a ring formed around the silver drain. If the home had become a prison then the bathroom was a graveyard, a mausoleum made of pink-tinged linoleum and blood that would never quite wash away.

He watched with narrowed eyes as his father spoke with the sergeant, detached and untethered as the world shifted around him. Fingers massaged the firm muscles below the healthy coat, and he recalled the warmth of Lexi's flesh as he touched her in desperation- a heat that was fading fast but was still there, as present as the sluggish crawl of blood. Dead by only a few minutes.

Curious then that the bath she'd drawn was so cold.

That same chill followed Will from the shadows of his past and into the bitter darkness of his present reality, spilling down his back in a shudder and wrapping around each notch of his spine. He blew into his palms to ward off the cold sinking into his fingertips, turning them stiff; as stiff as Lexi's body had been when they buried her six feet below the silt and brine of the Lakeside Cemetery. It was cold enough that Astoria circled restlessly around his ankles, rubbing her small body against the warmth radiating through his snow-dusted jeans. He bent down to scratch behind her ears and she mewed up at him, looking far too cute and unassuming for a creature he knew could turn violent on a dime.

"What do you see, Will?" Jack stepped closer than Will was comfortable with, Astoria hissing at him passive-aggressively with her own wave of discomfort. Jack spared the tiny rusty-spotted cat barely a glance before he was back on Will, the weight of his gaze enough to leave Will feeling a bit breathless.

Astoria rarely spoke to daemons, even rarer still did she speak to humans; but Will could feel the barbs of her anger sinking into him like her claws and knew she was close to finally speaking her mind to Jack rather than just glaring daggers and hissing rudely. Jack's bloodhound Leon stood towering over Astoria and looking balefully at Will.

Will's anxiety crept up his neck like crawling fingers, the tips of his fingers frozen stiff with the adrenaline-induced fear pumping through his veins. A hand fell to Will's shoulder, and he

nearly cried out in shock. When he saw Penelope land on his other shoulder, cooing affectionately and rubbing her beak against his temple, he calmed himself in fits and starts.

“Jack, perhaps some space would allow Will to process the scene without disturbance?” Hannibal’s voice was a welcome interruption to the heavy silence that had stretched throughout the scene, and it took all of Will’s focus to keep himself from releasing a sigh of relief.

Jack huffed something unintelligible, but he moved a few feet away, taking Leon with him, leaving Will to refocus and step back into the mind of the killer who’d left this wholly disturbing display. Too many parts of the scene resonated back through the decades to his youth; twelve years old and already so burdened with necessity and the weight of an abusive, alcoholic father and an absentee mother.

Losing Lexi had been the catalyst for his *coming of age,* Will growing a spine of steel and his daemon settling into her permanent - unexpected - form literally overnight. He hadn’t known he’d need to be so strong and he thanked any and every deity out there that he’d survived the battlefield of his childhood mostly intact.

Will readied himself for what he must do, honestly glad for the distraction it would provide. His thoughts had been growing darker of late, and this scene in particular was devastating. Each time he *looked* it was taxing, but there was something especially heinous about crimes involving daemons. Too many memories clogging up his throat and threatening to spill from him like poison, secrets etched into the bones of his ribcage that he’d be buried with; returning them to the earth from whence they were born.

In the scene before him, the daemon and the human were displayed together like the hands of god and Adam, mere centimeters separating them; a moment of pure connection suspended in time. Even if it hadn’t been for the obvious display, the fact that the daemon remained made it clear this was murder.

Daemons didn’t die of natural causes; if a daemon was dead it was because someone had killed them. When a human died first their daemon faded away, leaving nothing but dust to linger in the air and around the body. When a daemon died first, however, its body remained. The daemon would often be found clutched tightly in the arms of the deceased human, even in death it was too painful to be parted from your soul.

Will allowed himself to close his eyes and sink into the quiet of his stream.

I’m broken and alone; an empty shell of the man I once was. The very essence of life was taken from me yet I linger, angry and afraid. I need to know if I’m alone in my suffering; or whether others can share in my fate.

Like God in Genesis I’ll keep working until I create my perfect Adam; a new piece to fit into the hollow space in my core. This is my becoming. This is my design.

Will blinked, and he was back at the scene, Astoria sitting vigilant between his feet as everyone else continued moving around the space; collecting samples, taking photographs, and searching for evidence. *Evidence they wouldn’t find.*

“He wears gloves, not because he’s trying to hide but because it hurts too much to touch them when he kills them; reminds him of what he’s lost.” Will’s voice came out thick with emotion and he tried to clear his throat to continue, but was interrupted.

“What’s he lost?” Jack Crawford was good at his job, but not good with people, and Will cringed at the booming anger in his voice. His daemon was snuffling the ground around the perimeter, checking for things the humans might miss. Will watched him fondly for a few seconds, memories of his own daemon flitting past almost too quickly to pin; memories of when he’d still been a child and she’d been a dog. Astoria had always been exactly what he’d needed when he’d been young, varying breeds of large dogs that could cover him with a massive, furry body and were intimidating enough to keep most of the bullies away. She still remained exactly what he needed, even now as well.

She’d been a mastiff that last night; the night they’d found Lexi. The next morning, Astoria had woken him up with distressed mewling and when he’d blinked awake he’d been as shocked as she was to discover her new form in the body of a rusty-spotted cat. He supposed, in hindsight, that she’d become precisely what he needed; something small and deadly, able to go unnoticed when necessary, but also able to protect with snarling teeth and sharp claws when the situation called for it.

Lexi had been like a mother to him, his own mother fuck knows where on her quest for *self-realization* and success. Losing Lexi had felt like losing a limb, but Astoria settling had given Will new stability and a chance to protect himself. An ability that would prove necessary for the next several years.

It wasn’t until three years later, and enough complaints of abuse and sightings of Will *being alone at the house,* that the local authorities started looking more closely at Beau Graham. They hadn’t found him, most of them assuming he was on the run after realizing he couldn’t hide his crime forever, and Will became a ward of the state. The new sheriff finally figured out what Will had known all along; Lexi had been murdered, and his father was the killer.

Will had always known he was different, but after his father’s *disappearance,* other people started to notice as well. Will had a hard time making friends, far more comfortable with animals or even with other people’s daemons - something that just simply wasn’t *done.*

Daemons could talk, but humans didn’t typically talk to one another’s daemons as a sign of respect. Will never started the conversations, but daemons found themselves at ease around him and his empathy, and would often approach him at the disgruntlement of their humans.

“Will?” Hannibal placed a hand on Will’s shoulder, and though it sent a jolt through him he didn’t pull away like he might with anyone else. Instead, he found himself nearly sinking into the touch, desperate for the strong emotional foundation Hannibal provided. He was as immovable as the mountains, and as unknowable as the bayou of Will’s youth. Will found a certain level of comfort in it, being in Hannibal’s company one of the few times Will could have his mind go utterly silent.

Silent as the grave. He thought, a grim smile twisting his features. The smell of graveyard dirt and rot and decay filled his nostrils and he had to bury his nails into his palms to keep himself firmly rooted in the present. To keep himself from floating away and sinking down

down down into the depths of the Bayou like his father's lifeless body had. Like so many unsuspecting women most likely had at his father's hand.

"Sorry, uh, he lost his daemon, but he himself didn't die along with them and now he's trying to find a reason to keep living; trying to make a new connection." Will clawed himself from the edges of the brine and silt, looking to Hannibal like a lighthouse in the dark.

"Is that even possible?" Price looked distraught and his daemon - a beautiful parrot named Rosie - flew to him immediately, detecting his distress. She nuzzled his cheek, cooing gently into his hair. Will watched as Price's hand came up to soothe through her feathers instinctively, needing the closeness as a reminder that they were both safe and together. He knew how Price felt, calmed by the small weight of Astoria at his feet.

"I've only ever heard rumors… I didn't know they were true." Beverly's daemon was a raccoon, and while he was normally mischievous and a bit of a prankster, Kevin sensed her worry just as all the daemon's were picking up on the thickening emotions on the air, and waddled to her with a curious purr of concern.

Will didn't reply, his throat feeling clogged up with empathetic trauma; as though he himself had lost his own daemon. He leaned down to pick Astoria up even though she would usually protest being handled and held in public. She mewed at him, bunting her head against his and grooming his cheek with her sandpaper tongue.

"Will he kill like this again?" Even Jack sounded apprehensive and uneasy - a person without a daemon wasn't even half a person, a soulless, pitiful creature that would be better left to die alone in the woods rather than be left to live a half-life. Will's shoulders sagged with the weariness of Jack's question and what he knew he'd need to confirm for everyone gathered. The burst of pain from earlier slipped back between his ribs like a dagger, and he took an explosive breath before steadying himself.

"He'll *only* kill like this, he doesn't know any other way. He'll keep killing until he finds the connection he's seeking, or until he's dead." Will's eyes flitted over the scene again briefly, before he turned his entire body into Hannibal's side, shielding himself from the gruesome display. Astoria didn't even grumble where she was held between their bodies, allowing herself to be cradled in the protective warmth. Penny was on Hannibal's shoulder, where she often sat vigil, and she leaned forward to run her beak affectionately through Will's curls.

"So we have a mentally unstable man with no daemon and likely no known connections going around Baltimore and killing people at random? How do we stop him, Graham?"

"I don't think it's totally at random. I can't know for certain yet without more information, but I think he's killing them *because* of their daemon. He kills the daemon first, so the body doesn't disintegrate, and I have a suspicion his daemon was a feline of some sort which is why he's killing people with cat daemons."

"The first was a male with a lynx, and now we have a female with an ocelot. It's a minimal connection, but a connection nonetheless. I'll reach out to local law enforcement and let them know we might have someone targeting feline daemons. Katz, get over here!" Jack bellowed,

walking away from Will and Hannibal with an air of finality; his absence just as much of a dismissal as a verbal cue.

Will let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, chest aching with the pressure from his strained lungs. He stepped back from Hannibal's embrace so he could clutch Astoria all the harder, the realization that it could have so easily been them set up in this display hitting him suddenly.

Hannibal's voice carried through the fog and despair, running down Will's spine like a soothing rain. "Come, darling boy. Let me take you home."

Will looked down into the shallow grave he'd uncovered in the swamp that lined the back of their property. He'd found it totally by accident, running through the trees with his backpack snapping against his spine in a fevered cadence, Astoria wrapped in his hoodie and held close to keep her new, small body protected from the elements.

He'd been planning to run away; to escape his father's cruelty, but it seemed Beau Graham's reach was long. The tiny white body - usually pristine fur rusted with dried blood - was perfectly still in the confines of the grave, the smell of freshly turned dirt filling Will's nose and overwhelming his senses.

And Will had known, he'd suspected, but it was different to see it spread out in front of him; the truth buried out here in the darkness of the swamp. Lost in the still silence. Will wanted to touch the ermine -- Lexi's daemon Theo -- but he'd been frozen in place. Even time stood still out here beneath the cypress and the willow. A twig snapped and Will knew if he turned around he'd see him.

Liver-spotted hands and a whiskey-roughened voice grasped at Will, calling to him from the darkest corners of his mind and stirring like shadows slipping through cracks. He gasped as his throat was encircled by bony fingers, the skin rotting and grey and smelling of the brine etched into the shore of the bayou.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe and he was going to die. He couldn't breathe and -

Will snapped awake and, even though he felt silk sheets beneath his clutching fingertips, he could still smell that same brine carved into his skin and lingering in his nostrils. The algae-rich scent of the swamp was a thick veil for the scent of decay; pungent and fetid.

The soil was soft below his touch, spongy with the water that often saturated the lands- an ever-shifting landscape, patches of earth often turning to puddles as the marsh seemingly devoured the world in its path- rising with the rainwater. The sweet scent of iron and rust and sodden trees that grew up from the water, a spire piercing the sky.

It seemed impossible to think the scent of his childhood could still chase him down, bringing with it all the sordid things he had come to associate with it. There was no fond remembrance, no nostalgia for the abrupted youth, and his swallow was harsh- dragging

down his clenched throat. His chest felt fit to burst, ribs cracking as they trembled on his shallow breaths, gasps falling from parted lips.

But a hand clasped around his shoulder; firm and uncertain, and he reached for it as if on instinct, fingers curling tight around it. He was aware- in a distant, far off part of his mind- that he was embedding his nails into the flesh, carving into the skin in his clutch for balance. Yet he couldn't relent his hold, and Hannibal didn't seem to mind. He leaned toward Will, his breath fanning across the nape of his neck as he pressed a kiss to the top of his spine.

He said nothing- the merciful silence sitting over them like a comfortable blanket; enveloped in the warmth and quiet intimacy. He could hear nothing over the rapid flutter of his heart or the resonating thrum of his pulse, and he dropped his head as he tried to steady his breath. They sat like that for what felt like an eternity- time indecipherable, elongated and collapsed all at once. Yet it did pass, his hold loosening enough that Hannibal slid his hand down Will's back, palm warm through the cotton shirt. It was damp with sweat, and he idly thought that he should remove it and towel down.

"You were having quite the dream," Hannibal said, his voice thick with sleep.

He hummed, lifting his head up with a sigh. The room was dark, shadows spilling out from the corners- half the room shrouded in inky blackness. But he could see the familiar tuft of fur, the thin ring of vivid green as it encircled the iris. Astoria sat between his legs, the weight of her slight body a comfort.

His body creaked as he leaned forward, petting behind one large ear as if to say he was alright. "Sorry that I woke you," he said, careful to avoid the implicit request in Hannibal's words.

But Hannibal was not so easily fooled, and Will glanced over his shoulder to find his eyes narrowed in consideration. "You've taken the crime scene home with you." It was a statement, and Will sighed, turning away from the shrewd gaze.

"I've taken several home with me," he mumbled below his breath. The words were acerbic, spat with such detestation but it did not deter the older man. He continued to pet down Will's back, the bed shifting with his weight as he leaned forward and settled his lips to the base of his neck.

The kiss was wet, teeth dragging delicately over his flesh and it sent a shudder down Will's spine. He turned his head, tipping it forward to capture Hannibal's lips with his own. Languid, lazily indulging in the taste of the other. The large palm was still smoothing circles down his back as the other reached over Will's shoulder, fingers tracing the strong cut of his jaw. It brushed over his stubble- less manicured than he tended to keep it, his routine having fallen to the wayside in the stress of the past few days. He clutched his chin, cupping it in the firm and warm hold and Will was helpless to resist, letting his weight sag against Hannibal.

He sank into the offered comfort, like he was once more the same pathetic and feeble child. Vulnerable to the whims and cruelties of the world and unable to stop them. He choked on the feeling, and instinctively he rubbed his hands down Astoria's back where she sat in his lap as though he might wipe away the dirt on her rusted fur.

Hannibal was the first to pull away, exhaling a heavy breath as he rested his head to Will's forehead. "There's no reason for you to let the ghosts of one home haunt another, Will," he said, quiet a moment before adding, "the loss of the daemon was particularly upsetting to you?" He knew, of course. Hannibal had long since pried the secrets loose from behind his teeth where they sat- turning to rot just as the bodies in his past had. He offered no judgments, no hollow placating words to justify the vicious murder of Lexi and her daemon, each buried in a grave of water and dirt.

He cared only for Will and how it made him feel, lips tipping into an impression of a smirk when he answered only with a single word. *Powerful* .

There was a sense of justice in his father's death, however ill-wrought and crooked it was. But justice was such a meaningless word; one which would not outdo the subsequent tragedies.

Did their killer find justice in murdering the hard-forged companions, arranging the daemons like statues beside their person? Or did that power turn to ash once the bodies had grown cold, his masterpiece arranged, and the ache of his lost daemon still remained? Festered and agonizing, a wound that refused to heal and curdled within what remained of his half-lingering heart?

Will swallowed, resolutely shoving the thoughts down. Hannibal was right, there was no reason to open the door of his new home- his new *life* - to the specters of his abandoned one. Hannibal was an anchor, a solid and immovable force he could latch to. Sturdy where Will stumbled, his veneer flawless where Will's was marred with fissures and hairline fractures.

Will didn't answer the question; instead he carefully turned in Hannibal's hold- allowing the small cat in his lap to leap from her loyal stead as he draped himself partially over Hannibal, one leg slotting between his.

Astoria rushed at Penny - who'd been peacefully sleeping in her nest of blankets and random, loose trinkets - crouching down in a pretend stalking position before pouncing onto the sleeping raven. He shuddered at the joy racing just beneath his skin as Astoria ran her head over Penelope's wings, ruffling her feathers. She blinked her ink-pot eyes open slowly, but her gaze was fully aware and fond as she looked at the rust colored cat. Will could see it even from across the room, and he was happy, even if just for a moment, that he and Astoria had found their soulmates.

Penny had asked Hannibal to move her nest to the floor to allow Astoria the opportunity to rest -- and get up to mischief -- with her more easily, though there was no resting happening at the moment. And Astoria was nothing if not tenacious, and found herself in Penny's higher perch on the balcony more often than not. It wasn't often Penelope asked for anything, she rarely spoke; some part of Hannibal's traumatic childhood locked away inside of her like her voice. He'd told Will very little other than briefly mentioning his selective mutism for a few years of his youth.

Even though Penny was often quiet she was still warm, affectionate. She nuzzled Astoria and Will felt slightly more at ease, though still restless. The bird often brought him shiny baubles

and trinkets to add to his fishing lures, sometimes even convincing Hannibal to go watch from the shore while Will lost himself for hours at a time.

Will watched for a few more seconds as the two daemon's tustled affectionately, and then he returned his gaze to Hannibal's. It seemed Hannibal had been watching Will the entire time he'd been entranced with the daemons, and Will flushed under the weight of his gaze.

Will had never had an easy time asking for the things he needed - and asking for things he *wanted* was even more difficult - but Hannibal had always been patient with him; luring Will out bit by bit until it was second nature.

"Can I warm you?" His cheeks flamed, and he knew he was flushed pink with embarrassment.

Hannibal's gaze was soft, his eyes crinkling fondly at the corners. He pulled Will close, putting Will's face to his neck and encouraging him to breathe in his sleep-musked scent; sweat and matchsticks and iron. "Darling boy -" his throat vibrated as he spoke and the movement soothed something deep and primal within Will. "You can have anything you ever ask for."

From anyone else it would sound like an empty, idle promise. From Hannibal Lecter it sounded almost like a threat; but at the very least it sounded like a certainty. Will knew Hannibal would pluck the very stars from the night sky and burn the entire world to ashes and cinders if Will only implied he wanted it. The power in that knowledge was as great as the potential for disaster. When Hannibal said *anything* he truly meant it, and cared naught for the consequences.

Will cuddled closer, content to just exist in the same space as his perfect partner; identically different yet not even Fate herself could have stopped them from coming together. He felt so safe in Hannibal's arms that he nearly drifted off to sleep again but he shifted himself down Hannibal's body, settling between his thighs. He rubbed his cheek against silk pajama pants, his hands making their way down a toned chest, Hannibal's muscles shifting just beneath his fingertips.

Hannibal lifted himself long enough for Will to slide his pants down and off -- he didn't comment on the other man's lack of underwear -- and made sure to fold them thoughtfully before placing them atop the nightstand. Will looked up at Hannibal, a silent question in his gaze, and Hannibal gave a gentle nod of encouragement before carding his fingers tenderly in Will's sweaty curls.

Will closed his eyes in pleasure and dipped his head, licking worshipfully at the slightly wet tip of Hannibal's cock before taking the soft appendage into his mouth. He sucked, briefly, before adjusting himself and getting more comfortable.

Between one blink and the next, he was asleep.

Will should have known better than to go after a clearly broken man all on his own. He'd mistakenly assumed the man would be weak; easy to overcome, but it seemed he'd been misguided. The sucker punch to his temple had been just as unexpected as the strength behind it, and as Will blinked awake he realized with a sharp breathlessness that he was entirely *alone* for the first time in his life.

Astoria was nowhere to be seen, though he could still feel the thread that bound them together like a faint clawing at the back of his skull and wrapped around his chest. If he closed his eyes, once the starbursts of pain cleared, he saw the faint outline of her shape like light imprinted against his eyelids; a phantom shape and memory of her but not *her.*

When he'd gone back to the last crime scene, he'd known he was in danger. But he'd never expected a man without a daemon to be so easily concealed — or so strong. He'd expected the man to still be close by, perhaps even examining the scene again now that it had been cleared, but he hadn't expected to be kidnapped in broad daylight.

He recalled little of the moments that followed, his memory a scattered and discordant blur. Like the fragmented recollection of a dream too long after waking, when the details had turned nebulous and the events falling out of order. He remembered pacing the perimeter of the crime scene, Astoria at his heels. He remembered his thoughts as he went, turning them over in his mind like a prayer.

The hollow and resonating *loneliness* that was embedded within the scene. The resentment and loss sat like a shroud, permeating the ground where it corroded the soil. *The guilt.*

The killer lost their daemon, the weight of the grief leaden in his bones. A loss Will mourned in tandem with him - for so long Astoria had been all he had in his otherwise bleak life. The bedrock he built himself upon, and even the thought of losing her twisted in his chest as sharp as a blade. Such a visceral sort of pain, and perhaps that was why he had been so easily subdued- lost in the tangle of his emotions and the horrific *what-ifs* that played out in his mind.

A sudden blossom of pain erupting across the back of his skull, arms snaking around him, and a single cried-out command to Astoria was all he could manage to recall. *'Run!'* he had urged, hoping the fierce creature would heed the warning rather than stay to fight. An instinctual command, one that was bred from the well of sorrow that had festered within him as he glanced at the remains of the crime scene. The thought of her lithe body- still and motionless, laid out in a wicked tableau- was a vicious one, and he wanted nothing more than for her to get as far away as she could.

But he couldn't remember if she had, the moment of his abduction amputated at the feel of a hand placed over his mouth to silence him - his world turning black.

A blackness that ebbed in spots, accompanied with the loud-pitched ringing of his ears when he finally awoke...minutes? Hours?

Days later?

It was impossible to discern, his head throbbing with the residual pain of the attack. Each beat of his heart brought with it a fresh peel of pain, his muscles aching from a fight he could not remember giving. Yet the anguish was great, greater than any pain he thought he might have ever known. He felt split, as though he was torn in two down a perforated seam- eviscerated and spilling out yet somehow still pulled together. Crudely stitched together so that he would not slip into death.

He was propped up, his head dropped low so his chin rested against his collarbone. He winced when he lifted it, the crooked bend of his neck sore from being held for too long, and a hiss slipped between his teeth.

He wondered if he was bleeding - if the chill he felt brush over the back of his skull was blood matting down the curls - and he made to reach for it only to feel the burn of ropes across his middle and wound around his arms. Thick ropes, securely knotted behind the back of his chair; his clasped wrists held together in a bruising pinch.

He grunted, tugging against the restraints even as his head swooned and his vision blurred by the encompassing pain. *Too much.* It was entirely too much - he felt flayed alive. His flesh was being torn from the bone.

“You’re awake.”

He stilled at the voice, his shoulders remaining locked in their pinched coil around his neck. It was a deep rupture of sound, hardly heard above the pitched cries that resonated in his skull but he did hear it. He hid the grimace of pain that flickered over his face as he lifted his head from where it bowed, finally glancing at his surroundings.

The room was large, the walls dressed in brocade wallpaper and bisected by the wainscotting and the ornately carved trim. Sconces littered the wall at evenly spaced increments, burnished gold that glossed under the flickering light of the fire. It roared on the wall opposite him, tossing golden light and long, eclipsed exaggerated shadows across the room.

But the light was blotted behind the shadowed face of the man who sat before Will - perched on the embossed cushions of the sofa. He was just as large as the rest of the room, making Will feel all the smaller from his prone position- tied up and torn in two.

His jaw clenched, swallowing thickly. He liked to imagine that it was his fear he was swallowing back down - that it was a palpable anomaly within his person that he could undo. His gaze was hazy from the pain, blurred like a fog-streaked mirror - but he let it pass across the room before him, searching for any sign of Astoria.

There was no sign of her, and he could only hope that it was because she’d gotten away. That the pain that hollowed out his chest and clipped his nerves was wrought from the distance between them rather than her own anguish. Or his.

He glanced back at the man before him. The killer.

“That’s a neat trick you have,” the man paused, frowning at something only he could sense. “Being able to separate from your daemon; it must be excruciating.”

And it *was.* God, it was. Will could barely think with how subsequently loud and quiet as the grave his thoughts were. Words floated like gossamer threads in deep water, settling on the surface with a rippling effect only to be carried away viciously by the tide lapping at the edges of his mind. He plucked at each thread captured, arranging them in his mind. Each victim had been part of the same group therapy program; addicts and soldiers and victims of life's cruelties all gathered in one place. Meaning the man before him was either a fellow patient or the counselor - though patient rang more true.

He was also a killer; had taken at least a handful of lives, maybe more, who was to say. He'd separated daemons and humans in an affront to everything that was natural or good in the world, snuffing out that which gave them light and love and life. Will's skin pricked and he felt anger seep into his bones like thick tar, threatening to swallow him whole. His mind was at war with itself, his empathy for the man pitted against his desperate need to see Astoria, to know she was alive and to feel her warmth and weight in his arms. He wanted to both kill this man, annihilate him and remove every shred of him from this world, and he also wanted to *save him.*

It was too late for him, though. Will knew that in the instinctual way trees could sense an impending rain and prey animals knew when a predator was watching. Being unbound from your daemon was to be missing an integral piece of you; your very soul. There was no coming back from a loss that deep or visceral.

"I'm Francis." The man stepped closer, his massive form taking up all of Will's vision. "Dolarhyde. I've been watching you for a while. I'd planned to make you my last." Will didn't need to ask what he meant by *last,* he could feel the finality in the word, in the tone. Francis had planned on killing for as long as he deemed fit to try and fill the void left behind by his daemon and then he'd kill Will and Astoria before killing himself. Perhaps he even would have included himself in the final display, finding a way to share that space with Will and his daemon.

"What happened to him?" Francis seemed more beast than man, even in just the brief moments Will had been in his presence and the stolen flashes of his mind he'd had clinging to him for the last several weeks after each new scene. It made him curious what sort of daemon a man like that would have.

"He's gone," Francis replied simply, muscles rippling under a dark, blood-red sweater. It was then, as he was focusing on a slightly frayed thread at one of the other man's wrists that he felt it. *Astoria.*

He pinched his eyes shut, hoping Dolarhyde would think him crippled by a headache after the wound he'd taken - most likely concussed. Behind his eyelids he could *see her,* brief flashes; barely there and then gone again. But it was her. She was *alive.* His nails gripped the edges of the chair arms, his ears feeling like they were stuffed with cotton fluff.

"I'll find her, you know. She's not dead, you're not like me; can't live without each other. Or, maybe you are, I guess we'll see in the end." He sounded wistful, cautiously hopeful, and it stung Will to have that emotion weighing him down while he was grappling with his own feelings of helplessness. "I've tried it both ways; killing the daemon first to see if the human

can survive and killing the human first. It always ends the same way, with both of them gone."

The man sounded nearly gentle, eerie and raw with his overwhelming obsession, his *need* to be bound to someone again; someone like him. Will pinched his eyes closed, trying to claw back any additional visions of Astoria but to no avail. He opened his eyes again, taking in the possible escape routes.

Silence stretched between them for several suspended seconds, Francis crouching down in front of him, settling his gaze on Will's chin. *An aversion to eye contact.* Will thought unhelpfully. Dolarhyde's inability to look Will in the eye most likely stemmed from guilt rather than any empathy disorder. Will just *knew* there was something different about this man. Something he was missing. Something obvious.

A burst of pain at the back of his skull preceded Will's nose bleed, crimson running down his lips and chin. He hadn't had a nose bleed in years and he wondered if it was a physical reaction to the distance between himself and his daemon, a stress response, or trauma-related. Either way, it snapped the moment between them and had Francis shuffling to remove his sweater, applying it with surprising gentleness to Will's nose and tilting his head back with a soft pressure in his curls.

It was then that Will saw it, what he was certain was the core of everything he hadn't yet figured out about Francis Dolarhyde. In a gilded standing mirror leaning against the wall behind the killer, Will saw in striking detail a copy carved into the flesh of The Great Red Dragon, adorning a thick, muscled back and extending down past the edge of his pants where Will's gaze couldn't follow. He barely contained his gasp, but Dolarhyde saw where his eyes had gone and seemed to know exactly what he was seeing.

"The Great Red Dragon has been in me for longer than I've been in myself." He paused, seeming to fight internally with himself before he huffed and nodded his head, eyes locking on Will's so suddenly it rattled him. "I wanted us all to merge; become one. I tried to help Luka *become,* to join with me and the Dragon. He wasn't strong enough and…" he didn't need to continue, Will could see it all vividly in his own mind.

A man who'd always felt *other,* even with a daemon as part of his heart and soul he'd felt something missing. Of course, he'd want to try and unite the different pieces of his jumbled-up life, try to bring some organization to the chaos. But the truth was dragons weren't real and knives couldn't create bonds. God it hurt, he could *feel it,* could smell the sharp scent of disinfectant and blood; thick and cloying, clogging his throat. He gagged on it, hacking up choking coughs with such force Francis' hand was shaken off Will's face and blood kept flowing down his face when the sweater fell to his lap, blood smearing down his own shirt.

"With you, I know it'll be different. You'll kill her yourself, in the end. Killing can be a kindness sometimes. I think it's why I didn't die when Luka did… it's because I did it myself, isn't it?" He sounded broken open but calm at the same time, giving Will whiplash from the conversation shifts and the emotional pivots.

Killing can be a kindness. He remembered killing his own daddy, how righteous it had felt. How pure and right. That had been a kindness. For Lexi and her daemon. For himself. For the

world his father had been a blight upon for far too long. But, perhaps even more importantly, it had felt *good.*

Before he could respond, a splitting pain shot sharply across his forehead, worse than any migraine he'd ever experienced. He saw images flickering across his eyelids; Astoria and Penny mostly, and the briefest view of *Hannibal.*

Will opened his eyes and looked up at Francis, truly *saw* him, and he felt such a hollow, aching pang in his core it kept him spiraling from one sensation to the next. He wouldn't call what he felt pity, knew Dolarhyde wouldn't appreciate such a gesture, but he did feel *lonely.* An extension both of being away from his own daemon and from Hannibal as well as his empathy opening him up to Francis' pain.

He knew, in that moment, that he'd have to kill him. Knew a broken, twisted creature such as Dolarhyde wouldn't go quietly or easily into the good night. He was too far gone, too far past humanity to save. Maybe he'd known since he'd first woken up tied to his chair. Or, a deeper, darker place inside him echoed, maybe he'd known since the *first* crime scene. Since salt-laced days in the bayou when he'd been the weird new kid more times than he could count.

That's when he heard it.

"Will."

Quiet and intimate as a whisper at first and then louder than gongs signaling the end times. Or, in Will's case, the coming of *guardian angels.*

"Will!"

Astoria. She was close enough to him that their mental link was open again, her voice like a welcome breeze on a harsh summer day. He could sob with the weight dropping into his stomach – equal parts fear for her safety and an overwhelming sense of peace at being near her again. He held his sounds behind clenched tight teeth, not wanting to give them away before they arrived, hoping to maintain the element of surprise.

"I understand why you feel you need to do this, Francis. But I think you also know it won't fix you. Sometimes things get so broken they can't *be* fixed. Killing us won't bring him back, won't return Luka to you."

"Don't say his name." Francis seethed, the sound low and warning and nearly an inhuman growl, more animal than man in the wretchedness of his pain. Will imagined he could almost see the shape of Luka in the empty, hollow spaces left behind in his absence, in the black hole void of his pupils, the hungry, seeking twist of his mouth. His absence was an obvious stain painted in bruises and marks only Will in his empathy could see littering Francis' entire being from soul to soles.

"He wouldn't want you to do this. No daemon wants their human to die, it would be like killing an essential piece of yourself. He's gone but you don't have to be, Francis. You could live on for him and keep him alive in memory." He knew it was a longshot, but he didn't need Francis to actually buy into anything Will was saying, he just needed to *stall.*

He must have said something wrong though, because he barely had the chance to register movement before he was being bashed in the temple by an angry, heavy fist, his vision going spotty and black at the edges like curling video film.

“You didn’t know him! You don’t know me or what I *need* or want.” The larger man’s words slurred together in his rage, his fists raining down on Will until he slumped in his chair, everything around him flickering out of focus as the black crept all the way across his vision.

When he stirred again it was to a frantic clawing at his stomach, and he looked down to see Astoria in his lap, digging her sharp nails into his flesh in an effort to shock him awake. “Will!” She shouted in his mind, her relief palpable. Out loud she was whimpering soft little desperate sounds, sounds he hadn’t heard her make since they were both much, much younger.

Things around him were utter chaos, Penelope picking at Francis’ hands and face whenever she could, trying to help Hannibal where the man was holding Dolarhyde around the middle in a tight embrace.

There was a darkness swirling in Hannibal’s eyes when he jerked his gaze up to meet Will’s, a monster he’d often imagined seeing slumbering contently around Hannibal’s iris now violently and viciously awake and *beautiful.*

So many things fell into place in such quick order Will gasped aloud at the realizations. Hannibal was the Ripper. Now that he saw it he didn’t know how he’d *missed it* for so long. Perhaps he hadn’t, maybe he’d known all along and simply turned a blind eye to his mate’s extracurriculars. Astoria’s trust in him was enough to quiet any concerns Will might have managed to muster, though he found his thoughts shockingly empty on that front regardless. Astoria had trusted no one other than Bev since Lexi. Will realized with a smile he hadn’t trusted either, content in his aloneness, happy with Astoria for company. He hadn’t trusted anyone to keep him safe, not after the claws of his daddy had latched on and dug deep. Not until Hannibal. Until the *Ripper.*

But those same animal instincts he usually exhibited so beautifully in his tableau would now be his undoing if Will let him go through with what he clearly intended to do, the man’s teeth already bared and ready to slice into the thin flesh of Francis’ throat.

“Hannibal, don’t!” Hannibal’s eyes burned, the last mouthful of whiskey in a glass as his gaze pierced into Will, more monster than Will had ever seen him. Gone was the put-together, well-coiffed opera-goer and high society dinner host. In his place was a creature made of blood and darkness, skin charred black in the moonlight filtering in from the windows. Hannibal wasn’t listening, his monster compelling him to *protect, kill.* Will needed him to listen.

“If you kill him *like that* they’ll *know*, Hannibal. It needs to look like self-defense.” He tried to sound calmer than he was, his pulse rabbiting in his ears as adrenaline-laced blood pumped through his veins, calling him to action even as he was tied in place. Astoria sensed his distress and rubbed her head against his stomach, purring and whining in equal measure to try and soothe.

Will cleared his throat, realizing him being tied up would actually work in their favor. Even though his own internal monster had been awakened by the events and he longed for it to be his hands that ended Dolarhyde, he realized it couldn't be him. It couldn't be Hannibal either.

Daemons were protected by the law due to their baser, animal instincts often being strongest when their human was potentially in danger. If Penelope or Astoria could be proven to be Francis' ending they'd all be safe. No one would blame a daemon for killing to protect themself and their human.

Hannibal seemed to come to the same realization as Will, some of the stormy rage leaking from sanguine eyes and a flicker of his usual stoicism seeping into its place.

His jaw clicked, his lips clamping down on the bared teeth that had been only moments away from tearing into the column of Francis's throat. The arm wound around his middle tightened, the other peeling away to flatten a palm across his forehead. He jerked it back, Francis grunting with the abrupt twist- his chin raised to the ceiling and his neck exposed.

And then Hannibal *dropped* , kicking against the back of Francis's knees so he fell with them. They knelt on the floor, Hannibal holding the broken man in a perverse hold, a mockery of an embrace. His chin hooked over his shoulder, his gaze locking with Will's even as he spoke to Francis, the words low- unfamiliar in the roughened drag of his voice. "It will be better this way, I think. Some might even call it a poetic end."

Killing can be a kindness , Will thought once more. A relief, a sigh from a breath held too long.

How much Francis had suffered, fractured on his own edges.

Perhaps he would be whole in death.

It was a thought he seemed to share, his eyes turning down to glance at Will from the severe hold Hannibal held him in. He swallowed, the knot of his throat bobbing with the act. His lips parted on a heaving breath, and he struggled in Hannibal's arm- his muscles shifting with each twist.

"Luka-" he gasped, the name offered like a prayer.

His final words, as Will tipped his head in a nod- the unspoken command urging Astoria into action.

She leapt from her perch on his lap, bounding forward with a pitched yowl.

Her claws dug into Francis as she climbed him; the marks vivid red where they streaked across his torso. Shallow, blood beaded up from the seams before it smeared in his struggles. She clung to him, hissing once as if in warning before she lurched down and clamped her teeth around his throat. Small teeth, but they were no less sharp and Francis bucked under them, a strangled grunt of pain dragged out from behind his lungs. His lips were slick in his cries, glistening with spit and blood.

There was a flutter of wings that sliced through the air, Penelope crying out as she swooped down. The sharpened tip of her beak squelched where it pierced through the thin skin of Francis's eyelid, tearing it apart in her ardent plucks.

Hannibal tightened his embrace when Francis shuddered in his hold, veins protruding beneath his flesh. Maroon petals mottled his face where he strained in the clasp, anguished cries turned into wet gurgles. Ribbons of blood and tears streaked from his eyes- oil-sleek feathers holding the slight body of the raven aloft- her black beak painted red.

Astoria had made quick work of his throat, her fanged teeth sliced through the corded tendons.

Will *flinched* when she struck his artery, the spray of blood a sudden gush that arced across the space. It splattered, droplets marring the ornate pattern of the rug and the stiff, upholstered cushions of the couch.

Will turned from it, his gaze finding Hannibal's own- narrowed in his ruminations. The expensive fabric of his suit was ruined, saturated in the blood that still seeped from Francis- even as he laid limp and prone in his arms. His hair brushed across his brow, fallen from its usual coif. His lips pulled back in a snarl, revealing the sharpened tip of his crooked teeth.

Perhaps Will should have been frightened- or at the very least, *ill* with the swift realization of the monster his beloved was beneath the manicured facade. Perhaps, if he were a smarter and *better* man, he would have winced when Hannibal rose, tossing the body aside.

Not quite a body, though. Francis was still alive, his limbs twitching where they strewed across the floor. Blood pooled below him, an impossible amount, and he jerked his head- searching in a world that had gone black, shadows and blood and scratch marks from talons etched around the space his eyes had once been.

"It will be soon," Hannibal said, drawing Will's gaze once more. He stood before Will, hesitating a moment before he crouched before him- a warm palm splayed over Will's thigh as the other cupped Will's cheek. It was coated in blood, and it smeared onto Will's skin with the touch; warm and tacky.

Will leaned against it with a sigh.

"I can't untie you," Hannibal said, apologetic, as he swiped his thumb across Will's cheekbone. "To make it look right, I'll have to leave you like this."

In answer, Will shifted his head in his hold, pressing a kiss to Hannibal's palm. He meant to say *It's okay* , but when he pulled away, something else fell from his tongue. "I love you."

Hannibal blinked at the admission- a not entirely *strange* one on its own, but perhaps he thought it *strange* now. Now that Will had seen the beast he had long since kept hidden, covered in gore and viscera. *Covering* Will in the same as he continued to touch him, reaching to cup his face with both hands now.

“And I love you,” he said in an awed breath, the words brushing against Will’s lips. He would have to clean Will in his staging. Change both of their clothes to set the scene that needed to be set.

But Will suspected it would be no matter; he was the Ripper, after all.

He sighed when Hannibal closed the distance between them, leaning forward into a kiss. Content despite the ache of the ropes that bisected his torso; content despite the residual pain from his bruised temple.

Whole .

End Notes

This is part of a Gift Prompt Series I plan on starting! I'll take prompt requests in the comments on Ao3 or on my Twitter (@belladonnawyck). Most gift prompts selected will be 5k or less but if I'm particularly inspired I'll write until I'm dead haha

Enjoy! <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!